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CONGRESS, THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AND DEFENSE

ANNCR: THIS ELECTION YEAR HAS SEEN A LIVELY AND SOMETIMES EVEN BITTER DEBATE ABOUT THE STATUS OF AMERICAN DEFENSES. HOWEVER, THERE APPEAR TO BE SOME ISSUES ON WHICH THE ADMINISTRATION, CONGRESS AND THE AMERICAN PEOPLE SEEM TO BE IN AGREEMENT. VOA NEWS ANALYST JOHN ALBERT HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS:

VOICE: MUCH PUBLIC ATTENTION HAS BEEN FOCUSSED IN RECENT WEEKS ON THE CHARGES AND COUNTER CHARGES REGARDING THE AMERICAN DEFENSE EFFORT. PRESIDENT FORD'S REPUBLICAN CHALLENGER, RONALD REAGAN, HAS BEEN FORCEFULLY PRESSING THE ARGUMENT THAT AMERICAN DEFENSES HAVE BECOME INFERIOR TO THOSE OF THE SOVIET UNION, AND THAT THE FORD ADMINISTRATION IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS STATE OF AFFAIRS. THE PRESIDENT, WITH EQUAL VIGOR, HAS MAINTAINED THAT AMERICAN MILITARY STRENGTH IS STILL SECOND TO NONE, BUT THAT HIGHER DEFENSE OUTLAYS HAVE BECOME NECESSARY BECAUSE OF A LONG-RANGE TREND SEEN IN THE BUILDUP OF SOVIET FORCES AND WEAPONS. (OPT) MISTER FORD ALSO COUNTERED THAT ANY COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE AMERICAN RESPONSE TO SOVIET MILITARY EFFORTS SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO CONGRESS AND ITS DEMOCRATIC MAJORITY AND NOT TO A REPUBLICAN PRESIDENT WHO HAS PROPOSED HIGHER DEFENSE BUDGETS, ONLY TO HAVE CONGRESS LAST YEAR CUT MILITARY EXPENDITURES BY OVER SEVEN THOUSAND MILLION DOLLARS. (END OPT)

WHAT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED IN THIS DEBATE OVER THE STATUS OF AMERICAN DEFENSES IS A FAR-REACHING CHANGE IN THE OUTLOOK OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE, A CHANGE INCREASINGLY REFLECTED IN CONGRESS. LAST YEAR PRESIDENT FORD AND HIS THEN DEFENSE SECRETARY SCHLESINGER FACED A MAJOR FIGHT WITH CONGRESS WHEN THEY ATTEMPTED TO INCREASE THE DEFENSE BUDGET. A MAJORITY OF THE MEMBERS OF CONGRESS THEN BELIEVED THAT

HIGHER EXPENSES WERE UNWARRANTED BY THE WORLD SITUATION AND THAT GREATER PRIORITY SHOULD BE GIVEN TO DOMESTIC NEEDS. WHY, THESE CRITICS ASKED, IN A PERIOD OF DETENTE, ALL THESE NEW WEAPONS AND HIGH DEFENSE EXPENDITURES? THIS YEAR, WHEN PRESIDENT FORD SENT A NEW DEFENSE BUDGET TO CONGRESS -- INCLUDING FOR THE FIRST TIME, A MAJOR MODERNIZATION PROGRAM FOR THE ARMED FORCES -- THERE WAS A GENERAL EXPECTATION THAT CONGRESS WOULD AGAIN MAKE BROAD CUTS.

HOWEVER, THINGS HAVE CHANGED. THE BUDGET COMMITTEES OF BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS, WHICH SET SPENDING CEILINGS, HAVE LEFT THE DEFENSE BUDGET PRACTICALLY INTACT. THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES EVEN WENT A STEP FURTHER. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN NINE YEARS IT APPROVED OUTLAYS FOR THE WEAPONS PROGRAM, INCLUDING NEW WEAPONS SYSTEMS, AT A LEVEL TWO THOUSAND MILLION DOLLARS HIGHER THAN THE PRESIDENT HAD REQUESTED. THE FINAL FIGURES ARE NOT YET IN ON THIS YEAR'S DEFENSE OUTLAYS, BUT IT IS ALREADY QUITE CLEAR THAT CONGRESS HAS REACTED TO A MAJOR GROUNDSWELL ACROSS THE COUNTRY AGAINST CUTS IN DEFENSE EXPENDITURES. WHETHEA PEOPLE AGREE WITH THE GOVERNMENT THAT THERE IS NO IMMEDIATE DANGER OF BEING OUTSTRIPPED BY THE SOVIET UNION, OR WHETHER THEY BELIEVE AMERICA HAS ALREADY SLIPPED BEHIND, THEY ALL WANT TO MAKE SURE THE UNITED STATES HAS ADEQUATE MILITARY POWER, NOT TO THREATEN ANYONE, BUT TO PLAY ITS WORLD ROLE AND, TOGETHER WITH ITS ALLIES, TO DEFEND VITAL INTERESTS.

WHAT HAS BROUGHT ABOUT THIS REMARKABLE CHANGE IN ATTITUDE? OBVIOUSLY, SEVERAL FACTORS PLAYED A ROLE. BUT CERTAINLY AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT ARE NUMEROUS STUDIES BY GOVERNMENTAL AND PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES, BY THE BRITISH AND BY OTHER NATO NATIONS, THAT ALL HAVE POINTED TO THE RELENTLESS DRIVE IN THE SOVIET EXPANSION OF ITS ARMED FORCES AND EQUIPMENT. WHILE THERE IS SOME DISAGREEMENT ON THE FIGURES PRESENTED AND THE METHODS USED IN

THESE STUDIES, DEFENDERS AND CRITICS AGREE THAT THE LONG-TERM TREND OF SOVIET MILITARY EXPENDITURES IS ALARMING AND GOES FAR BEYOND THE NEEDS OF ADEQUATE DEFENSE, EVEN IF SOVIET MEASURES VIS-A-VIS CHINA ARE CONSIDERED. THERE IS ALSO A GENERAL REALIZATION AMONG THE AMERICAN PEOPLE THAT THE SO-CALLED RELAXATION OF TENSIONS, UNDER WHATEVER NAME YOU MAY GIVE IT, HAS NOT PREVENTED THE SOVIET UNION FROM CARRYING OUT AN EXPANSIONARY POLICY, AS WITNESSED SO IMPRESSIVELY BY ITS ACTIONS IN ANGOLA.

IN SHORT, SOVIET POLICIES AND ACTIONS HAVE HAD A SOBERING EFFECT ON AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION. AND IT IS ONLY NATURAL THAT CONGRESSIONAL ACTIONS REFLECT THIS CHANGE IN ATTITUDE. REGARDLESS OF THE ROLE DEFENSE PLAYS IN THE PRESENT ELECTION DEBATE, THERE IS BASIC AGREEMENT ON THIS FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE: THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ARE DETERMINED NOT TO LET ANY POWER PUT THE UNITED STATES INTO AN INFERIOR MILITARY POSITION. OR, AS THE LONDON "ECONOMIST" REMARKS, "THE MAIN LESSON SO FOR FROM THIS YEAR'S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IS THE GROUNDSWELL OF SUPPORT FOR A MORE VIGOROUS ASSERTION OF THE AMERICAN ROLE IN THE WORLD."

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